



STRANGE CONFLUENCE OF PERCEPTIONS AND FALSE MEMORIES AMONG MASSES: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL READING OF VIRAL AND FAKE NEWS IN MEDIA AND CYBERSPACE

Rijo John

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Catholicate College, Pathanamthitta

INTRODUCTION

The dawn of twenty-first century witnessed unforeseen growth, progress and advancement in the realm of technology. Media, the fourth pillar of democracy is a powerful tool in influencing people leading to formation of perceptions. Though there are immense possibilities associated with media and cyberspace, the problems and dangers associated with its mishandling is a serious issue. Every day, every second, being surrounded by various breaking news, the society is eager to get something new. Curious and interesting news gain better currency in any society and in a way, this popularity and wide reach lead to spread of fake news. Therefore, without any proper check or filtering, the news that we see and hear are often forwarded and circulated without checking its authenticity. And there are many out there in the cyberspace, who are deliberately misleading the masses with fake news. Fake news may seem realistic and therefore people often believe it without being bothered about the after effects and consequences of it, and they share it often.

Critics, academicians and thinkers mark this era as Post-truth era. According to Cambridge Dictionary, Post-truth means a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts. The opinion of the majority is somehow becoming reality today and this situation is so pathetic and problematic. We are living in the middle of 'different truths' and therefore media need to highlight certain facts as 'Real truth'. Though there is no need to use the term 'real' along with 'truth', Media had to use it because of the existing different versions of 'truth'. So now it is very difficult to filter the right from the wrong or the real from the fake. In this context only, the term Media Literacy gains its importance. "Media Literacy is the ability to apply critical thinking skills to the messages, signs, and symbols transmitted through mass media." (Vinney). There is an urgent need in the society to be aware and to be conscious of Media Literacy, which is the need of the hour.

Researches and studies in association with Media literacy usually highlights two crucial terms - Disinformation and Misinformation. Both these terms simply point at the spread of false information. Misinformation is false or inaccurate information regardless of intention to mislead and Disinformation is false or inaccurate information which is deliberately intended to deceive. So, Disinformation is more dangerous on comparing the two and on analysing the psychology of such harbingers, Apostles and perpetrators of fake news, certain vested interests and motifs become evident.

Now, on analysing certain fake news that became so viral, various ideas regarding the immense dangers associated with the issue becomes clear. A photograph of veteran Brazilian football player Pele became viral after the death of Argentinian legendary football player Diego Maradona. In that photograph, Pele was found paying homage to Maradona by visiting his grave and that picture touched the hearts of thousands across the globe. Actually, that was a morphed picture and it was not Pele who was visiting the tomb. And someone just edited the picture to create a sort of emotional feeling among the football lovers across the world. Again another news gone viral for wrong reason in India and this news was also accompanied by a photograph. The news was about a Railway guard father and a ticket examiner son in 'Indian Railways' and the picture was that of a selfie the son had taken when two trains met parallelly. Social media celebrated this coincidence with their news and photograph. But later, reports came out that the two persons in the picture were actually father and son but were not part of Indian Railways. They were part of Bangladesh Railway and the event actually happened in Bangladesh way back. It is clear from the colour of the train and from the name badge of the son.

When we analyse these two cases, it is clear that both are manipulated versions of reality and at the outset, these two incidents appear less dangerous. In the first case, the news actually united many Brazilian and Argentinian football fans and it doesn't have much negativity associated with it. In the second case also, it was a news of happiness and joy and it doesn't seem affecting anybody. But it won't be the case always. Some fake news may appear to be less problematic like these, but the unforeseen consequences associated with some other points at the need to sense this serious issue. Many are affected by the trauma associated with such false news and this can adversely affect even the lives of the victims.

This is evident from a media report that became viral in the year 2017 from Kochi, Kerala. A report came in news channels along with the photograph of a middle-aged man lying inside a newly started Kochi metro train. Medias blamed that man as a drunkard and they started the media trial. Initially a passenger clicked the photograph of a man who was asleep in the train. May be just for entertainment, or out of prejudice, that passenger shared the photo by marking the asleep man as a drunkard. As mentioned earlier, since viewers and audience are more interested in such curious news, and medias are competing for fresh news, they started accusing and blaming that person for being drunk inside the metro. Even taglines appeared in channels like 'Malayali won't change' and they opined that earlier drunkards were

common in bus stations and now they are far updated and are seen even inside metro trains. And few days later, these same medias corrected their wrong news and apologised for reporting it. The man was actually a speech impaired person and he was not a drunkard. He became tired during his journey and fell asleep inside the metro train. This incident proves that it is easy to blame a person without proper fact check and that was what happened. Later Malayalam film Vikrithi was released getting inspired from this incident. Those who shared this fake news also should be blamed for blindly believing in what they see in social media and in other media platforms. This incident affected a family and the trauma created by this fake news is something to be seriously discussed. The fake news aired by the media might be seen by 1 million viewers, but the second news stating the truth won't be seen by that much viewers. There lies the real danger.

Also during the Nipah virus outbreak in Kerala (2018), a fake news was found circulating in social media regarding the use of chicken. The news accompanied with a fake order from District Medical Officer, Calicut and it stated that the virus was found to be spread mainly through chickens and therefore people should stop using chicken. From the language used in that so called Official statement, it is clear that it was a fake order, but many shared this news and it affected the sale of chicken during that period. Later on, further investigations on this topic pointed at the selfish vested interests of certain vegetable sellers and they were the real culprits behind this viral fake news. These two incidents clearly points at the dangers associated with the spread of fake news. The mental, physical and emotional struggles associated with such issues truly points at the need to analyse the psychology behind those who disinform the public. From these cases, it is clear that the manipulators are sure or they are confident that such kind of news will definitely influence the mass. And for better effect, they also made use of certain photographs or pictures to make it more seemingly realistic. So the vision or sight can influence a person more than an audio.

Psychoanalysis, as a discipline attempts to analyse human mind and behaviour and tries to analyse the logic behind every human actions. Veteran Psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan came up with stunning and astonishing analysis regarding human behaviour. "Freudian motivation theory posits that unconscious psychological forces, such as hidden desires and motives, shape an individual's behaviour, like their purchasing patterns." (Ganti).

When we analyse the psychology behind fake news, or when we look at the motive behind these sort of actions, we get a clear idea regarding the confidence of the manipulators and will realise how easy it is to manipulate others. And again, when we try to decode the psychology behind the blind belief of fake news, we come across the notion of False Memories in Psychoanalysis which helps them in spreading fake news. "False Memory is a psychological phenomenon whereby an individual recalls either an actual occurrence substantially differently from the way it transpired, or an event that never even happened." (Perera). Certain images or events influence the memories of masses swiftly and easily and this process is

quite astonishing. The main reason behind it is our prejudice, set mindset and blind belief. People are usually having some deep-rooted misconceptions embedded in their psyche and these misconceptions are used by others to manipulate them.

False Memory is an "incorrect recollection of part of an event, or an incorrect recollection of an entire event. The person recalling a false memory believes that they are accessing a real memory- it is not an attempt to lie" (Loftus). The things that we see or the sight we have definitely forms or creates our viewpoint or perception. And definitely our perceptions are shaped by our prior experiences, memories and knowledge. "Memory isn't permanent. Indeed, it's pliable and often ever-changing. Certain people or events may make you more likely to develop false memories. Most false memories aren't malicious or even intentionally hurtful. They're shifts or reconstructions of memory that don't align with the true events." (Legg). We know about Mirage. It is just our illusion and is not reality. Likewise, False Memories also, as the title suggests has nothing to do with reality. But it is part and parcel of our convictions and mindset.

"Memory is also highly suggestible, which means that other people's opinions and memories may influence what a person remembers. Thus, widespread incorrect information can subtly influence individual memories, giving rise to conspiracy theories and harmful false beliefs. Incorrect beliefs about the death of Nelson Mandela are just one example of the Mandela effect." (Eske). Nelson Mandela died in the year 2013. But many South Africans believed that he died two decades before. Especially the old generation ardently believed this. The term False Memory was coined by Fiona Broome in 2009. "The Mandela Effect refers to a situation in which a large mass of people believes that an event occurred when it did not. The term was originated in 2009 by Fiona Broome, after she discovered that she, along with a number of others, believed that Nelson Mandela had died in the 1980s, when he actually died in 2013." (Cuncic)

There are many examples for False Memories in our day to day life. A number of surveys conducted among Kit kat users in United States of America gives us best evidence for False Memory. Kit kat wraps are available in different colours and those who frequently consume kit kat chocolates will be very much aware of its design. But it is astonishing that the survey conducted among the kit kat users points at False Memory. Actually there is no hyphen in between Kit and Kat, but a great percentage of Kit kat users believe that it is written as 'Kit-Kat'. Same is the case with popular character Pikachu. Though there is no dark line or mark at the tale of Pikachu, a great number of ardent fans believed that there is a dark lining in the tale part.

Thus, False Memories have a lot to do in connection with images since images are key factors in forming our perceptions. Malayalam film Drishyam can be seen as an example for it. The way the character Georgekutty manipulated others with the help of sights or visuals shows us the role played by our sight and perception. The use of images thus connects human mind with some previous experiences or illusions and this helps the

perpetrators of fake news to manipulate others. This notion will become more clear on further analysing Mandela Effect. Mandela Effect is also termed as Disambiguation and due to it, a large number of people can have false memories.

And here, in all the above mentioned cases of viral fake news, there were images associated with it. In the first case of Pele's visit to Diego Maradona's tomb, it was the image along with the news that became more viral. Same was the case with Indian Railway news also. The selfie of the father and son was the reason for the popularity of the news. Also, the image of the 'drunkard man in the metro' was actually that made the public prejudiced about the innocent victim and it was that image that judged him. People used to connect the image with previous experiences and thereby had a false memory and believed it in the wrong way. The fake picture of the Government Circular was also greatly responsible for the spread of fake news during Nipah virus outbreak. And all these images were somewhat realistic catering to the satisfaction of prejudiced minds and these images like the false memories and Mandela effect, forced people to believe those created wrong notions.

Also, certain things repeated will bring deep impressions in the minds of the viewers and that is what we see in the era of Post truth too. And if those repeated or often shared news could give more curiosity, it will become viral. "When a dog bites a man, that is not news, because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that is news" (Dana). So, what majority believes is not always right and truth can't always be so popular. Thus, False Memories and Mandela Effect have lot to do with prejudice in human mind and more studies and research are required in this field of psychoanalysis to analyse its effects on human mind since this is what that actually gives confidence to the perpetrators of fake news to manipulate others.

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